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East Timor and U.S. Foreign Policy: Making Sausage

LARRY DINGER/CLASS OF 2000
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SEMINAR D

FACULTY SEMINAR LEADER
CAPT. MICHAEL (PAT) MCGAHAN, USN

FACULTY ADVISOR
DR. MELVIN A. GOODMAN

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For most of the past two decades, the U.S. accepted Indonesia's incorporation of East Timor without acknowledging that a valid act of self-determination had taken place. That formulation arose from a "realist" evaluation that Indonesia was key to U.S. interests in Southeast Asia, that Indonesia's sovereignty over East Timor was a fact not likely to be reversed, and that legitimate human rights concerns would be most effectively addressed within the context of the larger Washington-Jakarta relationship. This year, a U.N.-sponsored referendum brought a 78 percent East Timorese vote for independence. Resulting pressures eventuated in a reluctant Indonesia's acceptance of international peacemakers. While Washington was not central to most of those developments, it was supportive, and at times instrumental, for them. This was an apparent change from the earlier policy.

This paper briefly recalls (from the author's memory)[1] the U.S. policy process of the early '90s, fast-forwards to 1999 to describe current players and their influences (based on interviews with participants)[2], and evaluates how well the "process" has performed this year. It appears that American decision-makers in 1999 were primarily influenced by events and by our Australian ally. It is less clear that Washington overtly considered all U.S. interests. A more U.S.-centered approach may well have come to a very similar outcome regarding East Timor. Still, in general, the U.S. best supports its interests by engaging in a more structured strategic analysis and a longer-term view.

The early '90s: Realist USG Continues Realist Policy

Portugal, East Timor's oppressive colonial master for 400 years, abruptly pulled out in 1975, leaving an unstable basket case. Indonesia invaded later in the year, quelling a bloody civil war but adding its own oppression. Portugal worked thereafter with a

small but vocal "East Timor" lobby in the U.S. which pleaded without much hope for the U.S. to insist on an independent East Timor. More vociferously, the lobby raised legitimate human-rights concerns with a small group of sympathetic Congressmen. The Carter, Reagan, and Bush Administrations took a "realist" approach. A stable, friendly Indonesia was the main aim. Washington backed President Soeharto's nation-building efforts, while raising human-rights concerns behind the scenes.

The UN judged that Portugal remained the "administrating power" and encouraged Indonesia and Portugal to resolve the sovereignty matter peacefully. The USG publicly supported UN mediation, surely based in part on a belief that Indonesian resistance would keep such mediation on a back burner. Both the Indonesians and the U.S. were concerned that independence for East Timor might begin an unraveling of the still-fragile fabric stitching the disparate ethnic groups of Indonesia together.

In 1990-92, when I manned the State Department's Indonesia Desk, Principals and Deputies Committees never met about Indonesia, and even Assistant Secretaries and their Deputies were seldom seized with the issues. An exception was Defense Under Secretary Wolfowitz, a former Ambassador to Jakarta, who retained a keen interest. Policy -- in effect to maintain the status quo -- was mostly affirmed via working levels which consulted frequently and harmoniously, always within the context that the "realist" approach was appropriate. That working-level coalition could rebuff Portuguese and human-rights lobbyists' efforts, in part because the few in Congress who took the topic seriously couldn't energize broad interest in their views.

That low-key environment changed dramatically on November 12, 1991, when Indonesian troops fired on demonstrators in full view of international press at a Dili

cemetery, killing at least 50. World attention focused. While governments, including the U.S., condemned the atrocity, action in Washington mostly remained at the Deputy Assistant Secretary level and below. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee held a hearing, and Congress suspended International Military Education and Training (IMET).

Fast Forward to 1999

Until the Southeast Asian financial crises, Indonesia, including East Timor, remained a lesser blip on the Washington bureaucracies' screen. During the year I was State's East Asia and Pacific (EAP) Special Assistant (1995-96), the Assistant Secretary didn't travel to Jakarta, and Indonesia arose infrequently during "EAP Weekly Informals" among senior officials from State, NSC, DOD, JCS, and CIA. By the mid-'90s, the East Timor lobby's drumbeat remained persistent on the human rights and independence issues, but Congressional interest had waned again and IMET had been revived.

Then times changed. Indonesia's severe economic woes in 1997-98, coupled with those of the broader region, threatened global prosperity and brought higher-level Washington attention. Officials worked with international financial institutions (IFIs) and the Indonesian Government (GOI) on a rescue package. Sensing President Soeharto was vulnerable, East Timor activists pressed harder; but Soeharto staved off any dramatic policy change for the province. My contacts[3] tell me Washington decision-making on the political side remained at below the Deputies level, with the most active player being Stanley Roth, EAP Assistant Secretary at the State Department. Roth basically reiterated the "realist" argument, not seriously disputed by other key officials, that the stability of Indonesia remained very important to the U.S. The NSC, where no one in the East Asia shop had Southeast Asia expertise, was actively engaged in coordinating policy.[4]

In 1999, Soeharto's replacement, B.J. Habibie, didn't have his predecessor's strength of will. Sensing an opportunity, East Timor activists ratcheted up their pressure. The UN also pushed harder for a meaningful resolution of the independence issue. Habibie caved. Against the advice of the military (ABRI), he agreed that the UN could organize a referendum in East Timor on independence. U.S. policy-makers reportedly were not instrumental in that development, though they were publicly supportive.[5] Given past advocacy of UN mediation, Washington "realists" apparently concluded it would be disingenuous to temper U.S. support at a time when the GOI, itself, had gone along. Portugal, human rights activists, and Hill advocates for the East Timor issue were undoubtedly pleased.

Contingency Planning

The U.S. began contingency planning for the possible contribution of peace-keepers to a force which Australia, East Timor's neighbor across the Timor Sea, was prepared to raise to maintain order if, as expected, the population voted for independence and Indonesia then removed its troops.[6] The Aussies, once the strongest supporters of Indonesia's claim to East Timor, more recently had reversed themselves and had urged Habibie to accept the referendum idea. Still, Canberra was paranoid that any serious instability in East Timor could unleash a flow of refugees to Northern Australia shores and had offered to play a major role in any post-referendum peacekeeping operation (PKO). Australia made clear it would highly value a U.S. contribution.

The PKO contingency-planning process brought USG "peacekeeping" offices more prominently into deliberations. The NSC, particularly the Global Issues shop, coordinated planning with regional and peacekeeping offices within State, the Office of

the Secretary of Defense (OSD), JCS, and CINCPAC. The peacekeeping offices provided a welcome additional perspective with their practical expertise, including an institutional memory of PKO successes and failures. At this preliminary stage, there reportedly was little contemplation of whether U.S. national interests in Indonesia and East Timor argued for actual U.S. involvement in a PKO. It "seemed like a good idea" for the U.S. to plan for the contingency of events turning sour, with a resulting request for our help.[7]

All Hell Breaks Loose; Australia Steps Forward; the U.S. Deputies Decide

The referendum finally took place peacefully at the end of August, gaining favorable world-media attention. However, in succeeding days, anti-independence militias, rather blatantly supported by elements within ABRI, responded with a campaign of violence, killing some pro-independence advocates, destroying property, and causing large numbers of people to flee to the hills and across the land border to West Timor. The international community, including the U.S., had not anticipated such a sudden, massive explosion of violence. UN credibility was on the line. Australia moved rapidly to implement its offer to lead a force of peace-keepers. There was a hitch though. All external powers agreed that Indonesia, which still claimed "sovereignty" over East Timor and maintained thousands of combat troops there, would need to give permission for the PKO. Jakarta was very reluctant to do so, insisting it could restore order.

At the point that violence burst forth, decision-making regarding the East Timor issue elevated to the Deputies level. Those senior officials had not been intimately involved previously; but they rapidly immersed themselves. They conversed by phone up to several times a day, without, however, invoking formal interagency (PDD 56) processes. Pentagon staff often had little or no opportunity to contribute background to

the Under Secretary for Policy between calls. State's Assistant Secretary Roth, who had previously dominated discussion on the issue, was out of town. Lower levels of EAP and the International Operations (IO) peacekeeping office scrambled to meet the Under Secretary for Political Affairs' needs. At the NSC, the Deputy NSA coordinated. His office for East Asia still had no staff with long-standing Indonesia expertise.[8]

An urgent topic of the Deputies' conversations was how to convince Jakarta to permit Australia's PKO to enter East Timor. There reportedly was no explicit evaluation of how application of pressure on Jakarta might affect longer-term U.S. interests in Indonesia. Instead, the Deputies drove to a quick consensus based on a moral imperative: the militia violence simply could not stand. It directly refuted the UN referendum and was causing the deaths of innocent people who had voted relying on UN assurances of safety. The U.S. had to join the effort to stop the killing.[9]

The UN was not lobbying, though it obviously was interested. Portugal was pressing Washington at the highest levels and human rights activists were vocal, but sources say those were not decisive influences. Reportedly, the only outside pressures which significantly buttressed the Deputies' consensus were from Australia and the Hill. The number of Congressmen with an interest in East Timor remained small; but, as one staffer explained, it doesn't take many members to lead a majority of colleagues when the issue is whether to condemn violence such as was seen last September. Senators Leahy and Feingold proposed legislation to bar U.S. support for IFI assistance to Indonesia. [10]

The Deputies agreed to threaten rapidly escalating sanctions with deadlines, which were explicitly explained to the GOI. The USG encouraged other influential nations to add their leverage. Jakarta remained adamant past the first deadline, triggering

a suspension of all U.S. military assistance. Only two days prior to the second deadline, which would have had the U.S. vote down IFI aid that Indonesia still desperately needed, Jakarta folded and "invited" the Aussie PKO in. (Note: the Leahy/Feingold bill failed in the final days of the legislative session; but fear that it might pass despite Indonesia having bowed to the PKO worried the Clinton Administration throughout the fall.)[11]

A second subject for the Deputies was how to respond to Australia's intense pressure for U.S. involvement in the PKO. The Aussies were desperately anxious for visible USG involvement, to add the sole-superpower's political credibility to their effort. Canberra insisted strongly and at the highest levels that it was time for Washington to repay past frequent and sizable GOA contributions to U.S.-led operations around the world. Those factors had resonance; and the USG, of its own accord, surely saw an opportunity to encourage regional allies, in the post-Cold-War age, to grasp regional PKO leadership when necessary rather than rely on the U.S. to do so. The Washington tendency reportedly was to accept Australia's policy judgments, since the Aussies were closer to the scene, and to focus on the importance of standing beside our ally. All but JCS accepted from the first that the USG should contribute.[12]

The JCS initial opposition, in the words of one involved staffer, "reflected the military's standard view that the USG should always reject involvement of U.S. troops in operations short of open warfare." Also, JCS argued that Australia could do the job on its own, in good part due to equipment from, and training with, the U.S. Another staffer said the response from non-DOD officials was, per usual, to wait for OSD to bring JCS around. Reportedly, very senior discussions between civilian and military leaders within

the Pentagon did take place, and, in short order, all were in agreement to back our ally and contribute to the PKO.[13]

On the question of just what that contribution should be, decision-making was also by consensus. It was simply accepted that putting U.S. combat troops into East Timor had "no bounce." Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo had left no enthusiasm in any quarter for putting American forces seriously in harm's way in such a backwater. Staffers report that even the Aussies apparently anticipated as much and never asked for U.S. combat forces, not even informally. That made it relatively easy to commit about 200 support troops -- communications, intelligence, and transportation specialists -- along with equipment including lift assets, to the operation. While Washington publicly claimed the contribution to be assets the U.S. was uniquely capable to provide, staffers said that wasn't quite so. Many of the U.S. forces played marginal roles and, after the initial publicity, were gradually withdrawn.[14]

Comments about the Process

Several commentators have proposed factors the USG should consider in deciding when to participate in PKOs. Thomas Friedman suggests four key questions: Is there a strategic rationale? Can we make a reasonable difference at a reasonable cost? Will it be sustainable at reasonable cost? Can we walk and chew gum at the same time (i.e., are we spreading our military forces too thinly)?[15] Other thoughtful observers ask: Can the proposal be retailed to the American public (i.e., are vital interests affected or are U.S. lives already at risk)? Are allies willing to help? What effect would our action have on alliances? What effect would it have on possible foes? Are the costs/risks too high? Does the target population want help? Is the target population willing to contribute?

How bad are the atrocities? How capable are we to end them? Is a desire to intervene welling up from the American grassroots? Morally, should the sole superpower be inclined to intervene throughout the world when abused people cry out for relief?[16]

Such questions can help decision-makers focus on key issues in deciding whether to intervene in a humanitarian crisis. Yet how many of those questions were addressed explicitly as the U.S. decided to help intervene in East Timor? My sources indicate that distaste for the brazen, bloody, and apparently ABRI-backed challenge to a UN referendum plus a desire to back our ally Australia overwhelmed most other thoughts.[17] On the other hand, the Deputies did judge there was insufficient "bounce" to send a U.S. combat force, an indication that limited U.S. interests were factored in, to some degree.

In this instance, if all questions had been asked, many of the answers would likely have supported the limited U.S. role that was chosen. Still, some relevant concerns may not have been given full consideration. Informal conversations were flowing rapidly, probably offering scant opportunity to contemplate all alternative views. Were long-standing "realist" arguments emphasizing the importance of a stable and economically prosperous Indonesia in a cordial relationship with the U.S. weighed amidst the whirl-wind of the near-term human-rights issue, Australia's anxiety, and the Congressional pressure? Was East Timor's potential to set precedents for other Indonesian provinces to split off and breed instability considered? Was the province's possibly poor potential to coalesce into a viable, stable, prosperous, truly independent nation factored in? Again, if the questions were asked during the informal phone calls, the balance of judgment could certainly have fallen on the side of backing the UN and our ally Australia in protecting the East Timorese people. The only point is the need for a deliberate balancing.

The Australian role raises another question. U.S. decision-makers reportedly relied to some extent on Australian judgments in analyzing the East Timor issue. However, the U.S. and a regional ally may well have different interests and perspectives. An example is the previously mentioned Australian paranoia that hordes of Indonesian refugees will flow south one day, seeking a haven. That worry is deep-seated, including among some senior GOA leaders, and it colors Australian judgments about Indonesia and East Timor. However, it is hard to find evidence that most ordinary Indonesians or East Timorese, many of whom still live poor, crowded, and oppressed lives, are pining to climb on boats and travel to Australia. Most are very loyal to family and culture and appear to see their future within their homeland.

While there are benefits in encouraging regional allies to take the lead in regional humanitarian matters, there are risks in accepting that an ally's interests, and judgments based on those interests, are ours. To the extent we sacrifice our independent judgment and rely instead on that of an ally, we may at times damage relationships with other nations which our own interests would not require damaging. The argument somewhat parallels that of strategic thinkers who warn that a threat-based national-security policy would allow others to dictate where and when we act.[18] Again, in the East Timor instance, it may be that an independent evaluation of **U.S**. interests, costs, and risks brought us to the position we took. But the generalizing point is the danger in accepting even a close ally's judgments absent an independent evaluation of our own interests.

I'll conclude by returning to basic decision-making. None of my sources mentioned PDD 25, which sets guidelines and conditions for involvement of U.S. troops in international operations. One source did note that the PDD 56 process for complex

contingency operations was developed to guide decisions on issues like East Timor but was not invoked.[19] The source opined that the result probably wouldn't have been much different had formal processes been followed. Perhaps not. However, ad hoc decision-making -- via a flurry of phone calls by senior policy officials who haven't previously been immersed in the specifics of the crisis under consideration -- inevitably risks mistakes, no matter how bright, savvy, experienced, and collegial the senior officials are. History may confirm that the Deputies came to the best possible conclusions on East Timor this year. If so, I propose that result was in spite of the informal process utilized, not because of it.

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[1] The author was a political officer at Embassy Jakarta from 1987-90, the Indonesia Desk Officer at the State Department from 1990-92, the East Asia Bureau Special Assistant from 1995-96, and has followed Indonesia/East Timor issues as a hobby since. The author visited East Timor in April 1990 and again in November 1991 (in the immediate aftermath of the "Dili Massacre"). Unless footnoted, information in this paper is drawn from the author's memory.

[2] Research for this paper included conversations in December 1999 with several officials who have worked in the Pentagon, the State Department, and the National Security Council within the past two years on Indonesia/East Timor issues. Striving for as much candor as possible, the author promised that any comments used would be without attribution. If any of those conversations are misrepresented herein, the fault is the author's alone.

[3] Conversations with USG officials involved in Indonesia/East Timor policy issues per footnote 2, December 1999.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Friedman, Thomas, Op/Ed piece in the New York Times, September 1999.

[16] Several lecturers offered such criteria, on a non-attribution basis, during presentations to the National War College Class of 2000, August-November 1999.

[17] Conversations with staffers, Opcit., December 1999.

[18] A lecture to the National War College Class of 2000.

[19] Conversations with staffers, Opcit., December 1999.